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How Contemporary Anti-Semitism Is Influenced by Historical Precedent and Psychological Processes



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As history continues to repeat itself, the question as to why hate remains so prevalent in American society becomes increasingly more important. In the twenty-first century with the increase in online presence and social media, the ability to spread information, true or not, is becoming easier. While social media has its downfalls, it has allowed for the spread of positivity and inclusiveness across various communities. As a country, the United States is becoming more willing to accept new perspectives. Strides are being made, for example, in women's rights and for the LGBTQ+ community. Consequently, there are a greater number of Americans identifying as LGBT as they feel views on homosexuality in general are more accepted (Anna, 2017) . However, anti-Semitism in America is at an even higher point now than ever before. There is a rise in both online hatred and physical hate crimes against the Jews, including more violent attacks on synagogues, homes, schools and Jews themselves. Present day anti-Semitism can in part be explained by the unconscious nature of human beings and the history of degradation and othering that Jews have faced for centuries. Throughout history, there has been recurrent prejudice against the Jews. Beginning from biblical times continuing through WWII and now to the present day, Jews have been othered and made to feel like outcasts due to their religious beliefs. It is important to understand why in the twenty-first century, as others are being accepted, Jews are facing even more discrimination than ever before.

By better understanding the history of anti-Semitism, Americans can try to reverse the trend. Trends throughout history allow for a basic explanation of why anti-Semitism remains so pervasive. If parallels can be drawn throughout different time periods and groups of people, it may be possible to begin to understand the reasons for its persistence. In this context, history and psychology both play major roles in the rise in anti-Semitism. A deep-rooted hatred instilled in the minds of thousands of Americans, has been witnessed over the course of history. The hate

that has taken place for generations gives present day Americans an “excuse” to they think the way that they do. In this way history affects the psychological processes of Americans as hatred can be passed down through generations. Three very specific examples of these psychological processes that we see throughout history include the othering of the Jews, scapegoating, and the rise in the Holocaust denial movement. Anti-Semitism, not a new concept, is highly prevalent in America today, due in part to historical precedent and various psychological aspects including the mimetic scape goat theory, unconscious bias, and Holocaust denial.

History of Anti-Semitism

In order to try and explain the pervasiveness of anti-Semitism, it is important to first define it. Anti-Semitism is suspicion, hatred, or prejudice against Jewish individuals or groups (Groth, 1971). While it originated in ancient times, this old form of hostility has been pervasive through until modern times. Some researchers estimate hatred of the Jews has been around for over 2,000 years (Lotenshtein, 2019). There are various types of anti-Semitism, which are dependent on the individual. Some anti-Semites refuse any kind of personal contact or relationship with Jews (Curtis, 1997). There are also “antimodernists who see Jews as responsible for the ills of urban society or as perpetually engaged in conspiracies against existing societies” (Curtis, 1997, p. 2). Anti-Semitism is generally a form of racism, as during WWII Hitler believed that the Jews were inferior, and thus should be categorized as their own race. This has now been scientifically proven to be inaccurate as there is only one kind of race, which is the human race (Rieger, 1998). However, there are groups of anti-Semites that still buy into the racial ideology.

While the term anti-Semitism may have been coined more recently, prejudice against the Jews began in ancient times. This term originated around 1879, coined by a German polemicist

named Wilhelm Marr (Meer, 2014). Some research suggests that the first form of this hatred originated in the Book of Esther around 400 B.C. when Haman described the Jews as “a people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the King’s laws...” (Groth, 1971, p. 89). This belief held true through much of the Holy Roman Empire around 800 A.D. as Christianity became the widely popular, most accepted religion. Up until 1965, the Catholic Church claimed that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus (Lotenshtein, 2019). Anti-Semitism survived across various time periods, as Jewish immigrants arrived in the United States beginning around 1820 and has reached an all-time high now many decades later.

Othering

In order to preserve our self-identity, humans subconsciously put specific groups of people into their own category, as the “other.” Self- identity is the distinction between the self and the other. It can be explained by the following quote, “I define what I am in contrast to what I am not” (Franklin et al., 2005). This grave distinction, in turn, allows for a dehumanization of alienated groups of people. Ehlebracht explains that, “Rather than remembering that every person is a complex bundle of emotions, ideas, motivations, reflexes, priorities, and many other subtle aspects, it’s sometimes easier to dismiss them as being in some way less human” (Ehlebracht, 2019, p.1). By protecting themselves and attempting to preserve their self-identity, people show a lack of understanding for others and a greater likelihood of harboring racist thoughts. By not identifying with the “othered” group, humans have the ability to blame and degrade. This has happened to the Jews for centuries and instills the idea that Jews are alien or different from others. Due to the events throughout history, Americans today already have a

preconceived notion of the Jew as the “other,” which is a major problem resulting in contemporary anti-Semitism.

Othering refers to the process through which a group of people is made to feel radically different from the general population (Franklin et al., 2005). Examples of othering originated back in biblical times. After the crucifixion of Christ, speculated to be around 33 A.D., the Jews faced extreme backlash as the Christians believed the Jews were responsible for Christ’s death. Unfortunately, some present-day churches still hold this belief to be true (Curtis, 1997). This idea of the Jew as the other continued through to medieval Europe with the union of church and state around 380 AD. The union of church and state was solidified with the Edict of Thessalonica, in which Christianity was made the official state religion of Europe. At the First Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D., the Four Marks of the Church were defined as, “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church” (Curtis 1997). The union of church and state and later doctrines isolated Jews further from the gentile community. As a result of their othering, Jews were blamed for the black plague and faced much persecution (Lotenshtein, 2019). The Christian church, as evidenced by these examples, has played a role in both the advocating and oppressing disenfranchised groups (Disney, 2017).

With Jewish people immigrating into America from 1820-1924 A.D. they faced much discrimination and backlash, as they were not accepted into American society (Lotenshtein, 2019). In America the rise in attitudes that lead to othering and the idea of “us versus them” has led to the targeting of vulnerable groups, in many cases the Jews (Disney, 2017). Othering not only occurred in America but in Europe as well. The most obvious example of othering of course occurred during WWII around 1939 A.D. when Hitler blamed the Jews for the social and economic downfall of Germany. Due to the constant othering, Jews have been forced to live in

separate communities. Examples of these communities included ghettos during WWII and in shtetls before the Holocaust. As evidenced throughout history, Jews have been physically and emotionally made to feel as though they do not belong. Today it is important that as anti-Semitism continues to rise, Jews feel that they do not stand alone.

With a better understanding of in versus out groups comes a greater explanation of why othering occurs. Humans create unconscious circles with people who they deem to be most like them. Unconscious bias, which will be explained later, plays a role here as people may not be aware at first that they are excluding certain groups of people. In-groups are defined as a group which a person identifies with, and out-groups being a group that they do not (Greenstein et al., 2016). In-groups are generally more diverse, whereas an outgroup has a homogeneity effect (Greenstein et al., 2016). In other words, out-groups may consist of one group of people that all share a common race, religion, etc. In this case, the Jews can be considered an out-group as they are being othered due to their religion. Othering can be combatted through intergroup cooperation. Intergroup cooperation can be furthered by pursuit of a common goal, interpersonal relationships, and cooperative tasks (Greenstein et al., 2016). This theory can be seen in practice in American society today. Cliques, social circles, and hierarchical societies are the foundation of culture in the United States, and it is easy for people to find themselves on the outside of these groups.

Out groups often suffer mistreatment at the hands of those higher in society, and the justification stems from the idea that they are the “other.” In the specific case of the Jews, they have been made an outgroup over the entire course of history. Researchers explain that the Jews were oppressed in three strategies in the following order: first is the club, then the yoke, and finally the leash (Cantor, 2012). The club is the literally killing, slaughtering and hunting, the

yoke is the confinement in small or overcrowded cages, and the leash refers to the specific scientific experiments or genetic engineering of the Jews (Cantor, 2012). Throughout their history, Jews have been subjected to this type of treatment from being exiled from the Land of Israel in 70 CE, to the mass murder and rape during the Holocaust, to the degradation and psychological oppression still facing the Jews today (Cantor, 2012). While the true reason for present day anti-Semitism in America is due to a variety of different factors, each of these psychological processes provides a glimmer of insight for the way Jewish-Americans are treated today.

Scapegoat Theory

Another aspect of human nature that has led to the resurgence of anti-Semitism is scapegoating in America. Scapegoating has occurred throughout history and up to today. It allows for Americans to feel less guilty and almost gives them an excuse to act in specific ways. Psychologists agree that today, society can either encourage and cultivate empathy in humans, or do the exact opposite and suppress it (Cantor, 2012). Scapegoating allows for blame to be placed on the Jews in various situations over which they had absolutely no control. Lynn Sandra Kahn hypothesizes that “scapegoating occurs when a group ignores, criticizes, or drives away a member who represents or expresses unacceptable aspects of that group’s internal struggles” (Kahn, 1980). The research that Kahn performed on scapegoating revolved around the idea of internal diversity, or each individuals’ experiences and background. She explains that scapegoating occurs when a group of individuals faces its limitations and its own mortality (Kahn, 1980). The best way that Kahn says to prevent scapegoating within a society is instead of acting out when tension arises, try to describe and understand the internal diversity each person feels. Kahn’s suggestion of trying to describe and understand internal diversity is important in

explaining possible reasons why scapegoating occurs in American society today, and begins to set the framework for how it can be combatted.

Girard's mimetic scapegoat theory further emphasizes the dangers of scapegoating. René Girard was an early thinker whose work became popular around the 1960s. He attempted to explain various aspects of what it meant to be human. Girard's scapegoat theory focused on the idea that humans' defining characteristic is to mimic the perceived behaviors and desires of others (Riordan, 2017). Girard concludes that while reciprocal mimicry is important for social situations, it can quickly lead to intra-group rivalry and conflict. This can escalate quickly and lead to violence and a breakdown of the social order (Riordan, 2017). Girard defines this outbreak of violence as a mimetic crisis. During a mimetic crisis, the "all against all" mentality is replaced with an "all against one" mentality and certain individuals become the victims of the breakdown of the social order (Riordan, 2017). With contemporary anti-Semitism, it is obvious that Jews can be put into the category as the "one". Scapegoats are more simply defined as single victims that face collective violence (Girard, 1999). Scapegoats, as described by Girard, are "innocent targets of a senseless collective transference that is mimetic and mechanical" (Girard, 1999, p. 1). Girard further explains that the mimetic nature of human desire is responsible for most of the violent acts that distress us as human beings. Girard uses the Jews in his books as an example of the mimetic process of rejection (Girard, 1999). Girard emphasized that over the course of history Jews have been rejected continuously from society. In his work Girard emphasizes the point that "Mimetic contagion explains the hatred of the masses" (Girard, 1999, p. 26). With his theory, Girard provides an explanation of how humans are capable of scapegoating and why it continues to exist today.

Psychological Processes

Holocaust Denial

Another reason for the pervasiveness of anti-Semitism today relates back to the connection between the history of anti-Jewish sentiment and human nature. In the 21st century, with the spread of information becoming easier and easier, hate and lies are being spread more readily online. Increased online prevalence allows for greater support of the Holocaust denial movement, especially in North America. Holocaust denial emerged after WWII, and was used as propaganda to deny the reality of the genocide of the Jews (*Holocaust Denial*, 2020). Holocaust denial takes many forms and has various levels of severity. There are groups of people who believe that the Holocaust never occurred at all, or the Holocaust did happen but it is being exaggerated now, or that Jews did die but it was a result of diseases like typhus and not from deliberate executions (*Holocaust Denial*, 2020). Key figures in the denial movement have used the internet and social media to spread their beliefs, even though they are rejected by mainstream society. These leaders of the movement claim that Jews generated the lies surrounding the Holocaust for their own benefit and gain. Understanding the Holocaust denial movement gives a more complete picture as to how certain Americans view Jews in today's society.

Specifically, in the United States, the Holocaust denial movement is gaining momentum. This movement is key to understanding the promotion of contemporary anti-Semitism as it focuses on the idea that the "Jew is the transnational figure of hate" (Levin, 2001, p. 1). In North America, research has shown that there are far-reaching and influential denial organizations more than elsewhere (Levin, 2001). The United States, unlike other Western nations, provides complete First Amendment protection to its citizens (Levin, 2001). While this permits Americans the freedom of speech, which is good in many situations, it also provides extremists with a

platform to spread their hate. The First Amendment allows for both denial and hate speech, as long as it does not “threaten, defame an individual, financially defraud someone, or incite lawlessness” (Levin, 2001, p. 3). Continually the United States, unlike other countries has made significant technological advancements in the 21st century. The new Holocaust denial movement relies heavily on the internet in order to promote its beliefs (Levin, 2001). With this newfound convenience comes the opportunity to spread hate and for the anti-Semitic propaganda to reach even further than was ever possible before.

One of the most prominent figures in the Holocaust denial movement is David Irving. In the year 2000 Deborah Lipstadt brought about a libel suit against Holocaust denier David Irving. The trial is important to understand what Holocaust deniers believe and to see the importance of the events of the Holocaust being proved true in court. David Irving argues that the “gas chambers are a grand, conspiratorial hoax” (Wright, 2006). Irving believed that Jews did die during WWII; however, there was no Holocaust (Wright, 2006). Irving believed that Hitler was innocent in the annihilation of the Jews and said during the trial:

Where I differed from many historians was in denying that there was any documentary proof of detailed direction and initiation of the mass murders by Hitler, and I am glad to say two months in that respect has not brought us any closer. The view was considered to be heretical at the time. But this lack of wartime documentary evidence for Hitler's involvement is now widely accepted. (Wright, 2006)

Irving's arguments, listed above, have gained great recognition as contemporary technology allows for people all over the world to unite on similar beliefs. Even with the court case win for Lipstadt, Holocaust denial is still extremely pervasive today. This case serves as a reminder that there are connections among various historical events. One variable that stays constant across

events, wars and even time periods is humans' innate hatred, which Irving so vehemently represents.

Unconscious Bias

Unconscious bias is another strong indicator that links history to the way people think today. Unconscious bias refers to personal biases that people are not aware of (Graciela Cuellar, 2017). Unconscious bias is a learned stereotype that is the result of cognitive reasoning, making the bias automatic, unintentional, and deeply ingrained typically from a young age (Graciela Cuellar, 2017). Unconscious bias can be different for everyone, as it is dependent on an individuals' background, culture, and personal experiences (Graciela Cuellar, 2017). While people may not be outwardly racist, it is possible that they are harboring racist thoughts based on things they have heard or the way that they have been raised. In this article, the author warns about using unconscious bias or words like xenophobia, as it can relinquish blame placed on racist individuals (Bourne, 2019). For example, xenophobia, or the fear of strangers, was used to explain why in the 1960s in America there were "no Irish, no Blacks" signs in windows (Bourne, 2019). In the same way today, Americans are using unconscious bias to explain their anti-Semitic views. Research has shown that these thoughts can be reversed through retraining of the brain as well as therapy, giving just two examples (Bourne, 2019). There are several steps required to retrain an individual's thought process and it takes a long time. However, by becoming aware of each individuals' bias, being concerned with the consequence of harboring that bias, and by learning to replace that bias with non-prejudiced responses, more closely matching the values people think that they possess, it is possible to break that habit (Law, 2011). With less people not taking responsibility for how they think and act today, and not

understanding the extent of the damage their thoughts can have on their behavior, anti-Semitism is spreading greatly.

Contemporary Anti-Semitism

Over the most recent years in America, anti-Semitic acts of violence have reached historically high levels. In 2018, there were 1,879 recorded acts of violence, with significant increases in physical assaults (*Anti-Semitism in the US*, 2020). The attack on the Tree of Life congregation in Pittsburgh left 11 people dead and 6 wounded, which was the nation's deadliest anti-Semitic attack to date. The ADL reports that 2019 also was a record high year for anti-Semitic incidents. Just in the first 6 months of 2019 there were 780 anti-Semitic incidents reported, and the actual number including unreported attacks could be much higher (*Anti-Semitism in the US*, 2020). Over the course of history most attacks were not physically violent, but instead consisted of harassment and vandalism (*Anti-Semitism in the US*, 2020). Bomb threats became more popular, as well as robocalls of individuals threatening to shoot up or target various places. These places included synagogues, Jewish schools, and college campuses (*Anti-Semitism in the US*, 2020). As evidenced by the events of 2018, attacks on Jews are becoming increasingly more violent. It is obvious that the situation is getting worse.

It is important to recognize that in the United States there are other factors at work that fuel anti-Semitism. These factors can include education, age, religion, region of the country, political ideology and race. Just to highlight a few, there is a positive relationship between the level of education and nonprejudicial attitudes (Curtis, 1997). Research concluded that "all surveys indicate that education level is the most significant demographic correlate of anti-Semitic beliefs, with the least educated expressing the most negative feelings to Jews and other minorities" (Curtis, 1997, p.2). Consistently, research has found that older people in the United

States harness more anti-Semitic attitudes. Harboring these attitudes can relate back to older individuals' lack of better education and the time period in which they grew up. In addition to education and age, some churches do display hostility toward Jews and preach about their "part" in the crucifixion of Christ. Finally, anti-Semitism is less likely to be prominent in big cities and more common in rural, outlying regions (Curtis, 1997). This is due to the fact that in these areas, Jews stand out more and are more likely to be seen as "aliens or outsiders" (Curtis, 1997). There is more anti-Semitism in the urban Northeast however, which can be related to a high density of Jews, and increased competition for jobs and political power (Curtis, 1997). While there is no one answer as to why anti-Semitism is so rampant today, these ideas provide a basis for understanding.

Social Media

In order to understand how America allows for anti-Semitic beliefs to flourish, it is important to recognize the effect that social media has on this movement. Americans tend to look to the internet as some sort of connection to others, especially if they feel they are outcasted from society. Various platforms and hate groups prey on those individuals who are already isolated and who are seeking some kind of belonging and meaning. Research has proven that increased social media use and online presence is linearly associated with increased social isolation in real life (Whaite et al., 2018). Social isolation, either objective or subjective, can be defined as disengagement from social ties, institutional connections, or community participation (Primack et al., 2019). Objective social isolation includes one's perception of their own disconnect, while subjective or perceived social isolation is linked to negative health outcomes and increased mortality (Primack et al., 2019). With increasing social isolation comes increased opportunities

for certain individuals to join the Holocaust denial movement and for anti-Semitism as a whole to flourish.

While it may seem like the availability to find research and facts online should halt the spreading of anti-Semitism, it instead allows people to connect with others who have similar beliefs. Neuroticism is one of the Big Five personality traits characterized by anxious behaviors, negative affectivity and self-consciousness, which can foster reactions to negative online situations (Whaite et al., 2018). Research found that social media provides an opportunity for neurotic individuals to better form bonds online (Whaite et al., 2018). With almost 90% of young people using social media, hate groups have a large pool of people to try and recruit for their cause. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has a new team designated to track cyberhate at the Center for Technology and Society (CTS). This newly funded program, headquartered in Silicon Valley, found greatly increased levels of online hate and the targeting of vulnerable communities on the internet (*Anti-Semitism in the US*, 2020). In May 2018, they released a report called *Quantifying Hate: A Year of anti-Semitism on Twitter*, which showed increased trends and themes of anti-Semitism as over 4.2 million anti-Semitic tweets were shared (*Anti-Semitism in the US*, 2020). All of this research helps explain why in the twenty-first century it is so easy for anti-Semites to gain a following and better connect with people online.

As aforementioned, Jews have become victims of othering for centuries. In contemporary America, social media and online media presence is, in part, to blame. Humans' desire to belong drives their everyday actions and much of their thoughts. However, technology companies and social media are now changing the way that individuals and organizations can interact and communicate (Ehlebracht, 2019). In 2019, research showed that 90% of American adults use the internet and 72% of adults have at least one social media account ("Demographics of Internet

and Home Broadband Usage in the United States,” 2019). With increased social media use, there is an increased likelihood that individuals will gravitate towards those on these platforms that they best identify with. For example, there are opportunities to connect with people who are of the same background, sex, religion, sexual orientation etc. (Ehlebracht, 2019). While this can be positive, it can also reinforce the idea of “us versus them” and allows for the resurgence of a tribal-ness attitude (Ehlebracht, 2019). While this does not specifically apply to Jews, it does provide another explanation of their contemporary alienation. If groups of people believe a certain way about Jewish culture, it will be easy for them to form connections online and spread those beliefs. As Jews become more aware of anti-Semitism online, they therefore will feel more isolated and endangered.

Conclusion

It is important when discussing contemporary anti-Semitism to understand that there are ways in which it can be combatted. In addition to aforementioned examples of how anti-Semitism can be reduced is the contact hypothesis. Contact hypothesis refers to the idea that face-to-face interactions and bringing members of different groups together will promote better understanding and a reduction of bias between groups (Forbes, 2013). By getting to know all different kinds of people, there will be less fear and hatred. As mentioned before, many of the beliefs of anti-Semites or Holocaust deniers are based on lies and are manipulations of facts. As a nation, Americans are very individualistic and to take the time to get to know others is not a priority. However, if there was greater contact between various groups of people, there might be “the opportunity to disconfirm their erroneous beliefs and feelings about the groups” (Forbes, 2013). The contact or the experience will allow for more positive feelings and a better chance at reversing the existing bias between individuals.

Gordon Allport was an American psychologist who focused on the study of personality and taught at Harvard. He came up with a contact hypothesis in which he analyzed prejudice as it relates to a problem of individual psychological functioning. Allport defined prejudice as “an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization directed toward a group as a whole or an individual because he is a member of that group” (Forbes, 2013). It is “imaginary differences,” he says, that create real conflict and prejudice between different groups of people. However, the more that people interact with others the better able they are to see that their prejudices are misguided thoughts. Contact has the ability to break these stereotypes, create more positive attitudes and in turn improve relationships between various groups of people.

Even though the United States is becoming increasingly more understanding and open to new ideas, little progress is being made on the acceptance of Jews in America. As Jews have been outcasted and served as scapegoats throughout history, a cascade effect has occurred. The way Jews were viewed during one time period bled into the next and so it has continued, and even gotten worse today. It is impossible to say that if history had been different, Jews may have been accepted into American society; however, the events of the past have in fact affected the minds of Americans today. Various psychological theories including Girard’s scapegoat theory, Holocaust denial, and in versus out groups have provided more insight into the rise of anti-Semitism in present day America. In order to best reverse this downward spiral, such theories as the contact hypothesis should be encouraged. It is important that as America continues to progress into the future, each citizen feels equally welcomed to come along for the ride.

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